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ABSTRACT

Recognition that students at Midwestern State University, Texas, lacked a basic level of linguistic skills prompted an inductive approach to the teaching of grammar, in which nonsense words were used to introduce concepts of English usage. Working in small groups, students arranged the nonsense words to form sentences which "sound[ed] like English." Class examination of the sentences revealed some of the more obvious rules of English construction: that determiners precede nouns, that words ending in "ed" indicate either past-tense verbs or adjectives, that sentences require tense consistency, that function words are vital, and so on. (KS)

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When the Omfluker Agrally Glyphed Up: An Inductive Approach to Grammar

Jeff H. Campbell

Breathes there a rhetoric and composition teacher with soul so dead, who never to him/herself has said: "Back to basics!"? If so, he/she surely is not on the English staff at Midwestern State University. At least three years ago we began to feel that our freshmen as a whole lacked the linguistic skills we had taken for granted when our rhetoric and composition course was carefully constructed in 1968. There were clues, like the mother who told me that her daughter had made A's all the way through high school English in the late 60's and early 70's by "finding hidden meanings." The girl could, according to her mother, find marvelous hidden meanings in a simple green pencil if called upon to do so--and apparently her English teachers called on her for little else. She twice failed the required English usage test at her college, despite top grades in high school English. Then there was the practice teacher who reported that only one week of her 16-week apprenticeship in sophomore and junior English had been devoted to the study of grammar. Of course, we were less interested in seeking clues to explain the situation than in dealing with the linguistic disabilities that greeted us day by day in our classes.

It was cold comfort to us too that our experience seemed to be almost universal. If we were dealing with an isolated phenomenon limited to our own relatively isolated area at the "top o' Texas," then we might mobilize and get ourselves back in step with everyone else. Unfortunately, we found that we already <u>were</u> in step with everyone else! We set to work to re-structure our rhetoric and composition courses to meet our students where we found them and to do our best to move them in a year to where we felt they ought to be. That involved much that might be characterized as "back to basics," including a diagnostic test, writing laboratories for those whose test scores indicated the greatest need, and renewed emphasis on old-fashioned grammar and rhetorical practice. The experience is, I am sure, familiar to most of you, and my purpose

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here is not to describe our program in detail. Most of you can probably visualize at least its skeleton, and not in your closets, but in your own course syllabi!

I should say, perhaps, that our diagnostic test gave us firm statistical evidence of the need we had already fully recognized simply by reading themes. We used our own shortened version of the Prentice-Hall Diagnostic Test for Writers, and found that only 39% of our incoming students "Passed" it, that is, made 60% or higher, in 1975. 36% made similar scores in 1976. None of them in either year would have received A's, and in 1975 only 1% B's. In 1976, 2% earned a grade equivalent to a B. The test is not an easy one, and we were not particularly bothered by the large number of low grades. What we wanted was to discover weaknesses and get to work to correct them. We found that generally the students were enthusiastic about the opportunity to participate in the labs. "Opportunity" seems to be not just a euphemism we invented to "keep the dummies from feeling bad";the students, for the most part, knew they needed help, and they wanted it.

But all of that is another story. As I approached my own classes, I was convinced that "back to basics" was necessary, but I knew from sterile experience that some of the basics we threw out with the muddy bathwater of the 1960's were not really all that basic. When students have learned to underline perfectly all the nouns (or verbs, or adjectives) in a sentence (how basic can you get?), how much more linguistically skilled are they? What improvement has been accomplished in their writing? None, I submit, except that if you instructed them to they could take their papers and neatly underline every noun. They would still hate grammar; they would still see it as a meaningless chore made up by English teachers to occupy endless boring hours, having nothing at all to do with the things they thought and talked about in the snack bar or at the Dance Factory or in late night bull sessions.

I was convinced that grammar was not dull, nor was it difficult to grasp because of it's abstract nature--which is the reason a psychologist of a large middle western school district gave one of our teaching assistants to explain why grammar could not really be taught effectively in the schools. How, then, to get "back to basics" and still maintain "relevance"? If you detect a distasteful holdover from the 60's, perhaps a seed planted in that greening decade rooted itself somehow in the rocky soil of my psyche. Some of the insights and ideas that emerged in that decade still seem to me to make sense. If, in those palmy days, we went overboard toward the attitude of "It's mine and I'll write it this way" (and I must confess that is the title of a text book that I really seriously considered using some 6 or 7 years ago), surely that does not justify returning to an overly prescriptive "You're writing it for me and you'll do it my way because I tell you that's the way it's got to be" approach.

So I've gone back to basics, but the man who's gone back is somehow not quite the same man who wandered away in the first place. Transformational grammar has changed me, although I don't believe it to be <u>the</u> answer to our problems. Knowledge of group process, the use of games, the importance of recognizing ethnic differences and personal needs, the impossibility of even deciding upon (much less maintaining) standards of linguistic purity--all these things have changed the approach I inherited from my father who majored in classical Latin and Greek. I don't even have a slight twinge of regret now when I order two new copies of Webster's Third for departmental use!

By now I'm sure you're ready for me to get down to business, so I shall try. Here is the problem: far too many students can't write coherent sentences because they don't understand the way sentences are made. That means they need to study grammar so they can understand what they are doing wrong, so that they can see the nature of the error when I put all those red marks on their papers. Nevertheless, they are bright and vocal. They talk all the time, and most of the

time they make sense. Noam Chomsky and company have convinced me that these students really do know something about grammar--they knew it before they were five years old, else they could not have even functioned as human beings. They may not know what I call standard English grammar, but they have some basic familiarity with the ways language works. The basic, unconscious knowledge of the five-year-old, however, needs to become both conscious and more sophisticated if a twenty-year-old is to build on it when called upon to put on paper with some precision what he thinks.

Each student has a big, fat, excellent handbook which has all the rules and examples the normal person could ever possibly need. I've tried coming at it straight--cold turkey. It is formidable; it is dull. Students can learn to correct faulty sentences with some degree of consistency; unfortunately, however, they do not always learn to formulate sound sentences simply by correcting faults in the handbook.

Seeking an alternative approach, I decided to take a 1960's-type game, similar to one suggested by William Sparke and Clark McKowen,[1] intended to show the students that they already have a fair amount of grammatical skill. They should have fun doing it, and I would try to use the inductive method to get them to see the reality, the necessity, and the value of grammar so that they might retain a glimmer of interest. That's a big order, and I can't be sure I've accomplished it all, but at least we had one good class session that has already spilled over into subsequent work.

After two introductory sessions in which we discussed in brief outline the historical development of the English language and the handbook's introduction to grammar, I gave the students the game assignment. There were

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[1]Montage (New York: MacMillan Company, 1970), p. 3.

seventeen words, nine of them made-up nonsense words and the other eight function words of various sorts (three determiners, one possessive pronoun, two prepositions--or is one of them an adverb?--a conjunction, and a past-tense "had"). The students were to work individually before the next class, and bring to class a sentence in which they used each of the words once and once only. The only other requirement was that the sentence "sound like English."

When we next met, the students somewhat apprehensively had their sentences in hand. I quickly divided the class into groups of five and had them share their sentences with each other. Then each group chose what they considered to be the best of the lot and someone copied it on a transparency. The room was filled with laughter and bantering arguments for about 15 minutes, but then each group had a sentence they were willing to stand behind.

I put the transparencies one by one on an overhead projector, and we saw that Group #1 had come up with this: "The gromy omfluker maffled his lamronillo when the rungles had glyphed and the pleximush agrally binked up." One of the group members read the sentence, and the class agreed that, indeed, it did "sound like" an English sentence. When I asked the group what the sentence meant, the whole class laughed. I asked if they had tried a dictionary--they had, but found it to no avail. I parised them for making the effort, but pressed on to ask how, then, had they arrived at this sentence if not through the meaning of the words.

The young man who had composed the sentence responded rather quickly. "'The' is a determiner," he said. "That was easy. It had to go with a noun, and 'omfluker' and 'lamronillo' sound like nouns, so I just put 'the' with them." I questioned whether <u>omfluker</u> and <u>lamronillo</u> sounded like nouns and therefore called for determiners or whether the fact that he put determiners with them made them sound like nouns, but someone insisted that lots of nouns end in

er, so that took care of omfluker--until someone pointed out that lamronillo didn't end in er. Undaunted, the author of the sentence continued that since many adjectives end in y, he had decided gromy sounded like an adjective. The ed he clearly saw as indicating a verb in the past tense, so he had no problem with maffled, glyphed, and binked. He also insisted the ly signalled an adverb, so he put agrally before one of the verbs. As far as he was concerned, that took care of things, until I asked him why he thought of rungles as a noun. "I had to put it somewhere" was the best he could do. No one else seemed to have a better explanation, so I let it ride, hoping I might do better with rungles later. I asked if he had any idea what an omfluker was, or what it did to the lamronillo when it maffled it, but he had apparently quickly seen that the words weren't supposed to make sense, so he took the clues he could find and accomplished the task.

Despite the fact that no one openly confessed to trying to assign meaning to the nonsense words in constructing sentences, I found evidence in the notes of one student that he had done so in a rather imaginative way. On his list next to pleximush he pencilled in the tentative meaning "a complexly interrelated soft yielding mass." Maffled he thought might mean "spoke indistinctly; mumbled." Agrally he thought should mean "belonging to the fields--plus ly." Glyphed he identified with the Maya system of writing. Apparently this line of endeavor didn't help him much, but I found the thought process interesting, and I am sure that other students, unconsciously or consciously, made such associations as they worked. Another whole discussion might profitably have been devoted to how one can understand unfamiliar words by taking such clues--but that would have to wait for another day.

Group #2 produced this sentence: "The gromy omfluker had maffled his pleximush and glyphed up the lamronillo whtn the rungles agrally binked."

Again the class agreed that it sounded like an English sentence. They noticed that gromy and omfluker had been used in the same was as in sentence #1, although the verbs had changed a little. Now it was had maffled instead of maffled, glyphed up instead of glyphed, and binked instead of binked up. I pointed out that this was a good illustration of our modern English practice of forming new verbs by combining them with adverbs--a trait we had discussed at the previous class session. It was clear that up became part of the verb, and that it changed the verb. Whatever glyphed might mean, it clearly was something different from glyphed up.

Group #3 offered this: "The agrally lamronillo gromy had his maffled pleximush binked up when the omfluker and the rungles glyphed." The class agreed it was still an English sentence, but noted some interesting changes. One girl objected to gromy being now turned abruptly into a noun. "It ought to be an adjective," she said, "because it ends in y." We named a number of adjectives that do indeed end in y, but someone inadvertently threw in an adverb with ly and it was clear that y alone was not an adequate signal for an adjective. The group defended its usage by offering numerous examples of nouns ending in y, thus proving that gromy could be a noun if they wanted it to be. It was preceded by the determiner, and that was good enough. Then someone wanted to know if it was all right to turn lamronillo, previously considered a noun, into an adjective. Yes, indeed, was the quick response. College business, business college--one can do it either way. Agrally also raised some discussion, but it could still be an adverb with no problem, since it was now modifying an adjective. Maffled also aroused comment. Suddenly a verb has become an adjective! Shifts, yes, but still a good English sentence, quite within our normal patterns.

Group #4 took an apparent cue from Group #3 and came up with a new pattern using the verb as an adjective: "Maffled, his lamronillo agrally binked the omfluker up the gromy and glyphed when the pleximush had rungles." Now we saw some of the interesting possibilities of variation once the pattern is established. This group was sure their sentence was all right because they had substituted "real" words in the same pattern and were convinced it would work. "Tired," they said, "his dog avidly chased the cat up the tree and barked when the owner had measles." It didn't make much sense, but at least it proved to them that words similar to their nonsense words could be put into such a pattern. We noted that binked has become transitive in this sentence, since the lamronillo binked the gromy--he didn't bink up or simply bink. Also for the first time up has been separated from the verb and used as a preposition--up the gromy.

Group #5 came up with this: "The gromy omfluker agrally maffled up the rungles when the lamronillo had glyphed his pleximush and binked." This seemed perfectly acceptable by now, so I returned to the issue of rungles. Why has everyone used it as a noun? Could it be anything else? Someone said it could be a verb if it ended in ed, but it didn't, so it couldn't be a verb. Finally someone said "Oh, it seems to be a plural." Then everyone saw that was why it looked like a noun. Nouns form plurals by adding the s, and it was most natural to consider it a plural noun. I pressed on, asking if the s might signal something else. Someone suggested linking verb, but that clearly wouldn't wash. Finally someone said "eats"--and we had it. Rungles could be a third person singular present tense verb. Secretly I had hoped someone would use it this way so that we could have had a sentence lacking tense consistency, but I didn't catch anyone this time.

Some of the sentences that were rejected by the groups had interest of their own. For instance, "His pleximush maffled the omfluker and up gromy binked had the lamronillo when rungles the agrally glyphed." Obviously this does not sound

like English. The order is all wrong, and it didn't get to first base. "The rungles agrally maffled up the gromy glyphed when the pleximush had his lamronillo and omfluker binked" almost made it, except that glyphed just wouldn't work as a noun. "The gromy omfluker had his lamronillo rungles agrally maffled when the pleximush up and binked the glyphed" had its own originality and colloquial rightness--"the pleximush up and binked" sounded almost believable--but when "binked the glyphed" was added, it was all ruined. Although the exercise worked quite well devoting discussion to sentences that the groups agreed did sound like English, an equally fruitful discussion might have grown from taking the ones that were rejected to see what was wrong with them.

We were now ready to try to summarize whatever insights we had built up inductively as we went through the exercise. Quickly the students called out items for me to list on the board: determiners precede nouns; ed indicates past tense verb--but may also be used as an adjective; ly indicates adverb; y often suggests adjective; s is signal of plural noun--or third person singular present tense verb; his is possessive, must precede noun; English sentences require tense consistency; inflections are useful signals, but word order is even more important in determining the function of words; function words are vital (we probably couldn't have done this exercise without almost half the words being function words).

We had discussed inflections in Old English and the increased importance of word order in modern English. Now everyone really knew what inflections were and could see how they worked. At the same time they saw that word order was the more important of the two.

On the assignment sheet I had suggested that the concluding lines of Yeat's "Among School Children" might have some connection to what we were doing. One student suggested that it related to the fact that language has its patterns just like dances. Some dancers in the room agreed that one

really can't tell the dancer from the dance, since when he is not dancing, one might argue that the dancer is not really a dancer at all. And when no one is dancing, there really isn't a dance. The words, then, are dancers, and grammar is the dance they do. Without the grammar/dance, lamronillo and rungles were meaningless disturbances of the airwaves. Given a dance, however, they almost seemed to have substance. On the other hand, a familiar word like desk, denied a pattern to dance in, would make no more sense than pleximush. Grammar as a system for making words dance gracefully together somehow seems more attractive than grammar as a prescriptive device for cranking out faultless 500-word themes.

Well, anyway it was fun for an hour. The class really did seem more nearly ready to move on to working with sentence patterns, and then on to more traditional ways of handling case, tense, mood, agreement and sentence faults. When the omfluker agrally glyphed up he didn't absolve me or my students of some hard, slogging work with recalcitrant sentences, but at least we moved into it with a livelier sense that we knew basic steps to the grammar dance.

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